



Rural Touring Theatre Conference

Notes from the Meeting

held on 16th October 2003

Hunsbury Hill Centre, Northampton





Rural Touring Theatre Conference



On 16th October 2003 some 60 people met in the Hunsbury Hill Centre in Northampton to talk about theatre for rural audiences. The conference was organised jointly by the National Rural Touring Forum (NRTF), which represents a number of rural touring schemes and rural arts development agencies, and Pride of Place Theatre Festival (PoP), an organisation of producing theatre companies. Participants came from theatre companies, touring schemes, village venues, local authorities and funding bodies. The purpose of the day was to promote dialogue between people involved in rural theatre; there were no keynote speeches, simply lots of opportunities to share perspectives.

There were four main sessions. In the morning, people talked about why rural arts is important to them notes from this discussion are given on page two. They then went on to discuss three key questions – What are the hallmarks of a great company? What are the hallmarks of a great touring scheme? And, What makes a great relationship between the two? Ideas were recorded onto flipcharts and a summary of these is given on page three and four.

In the afternoon participants self selected into smaller groups for a more in-depth discussion on quality. The responses to this discussion are given on page five.

In the final afternoon session there was general support for the idea of continuing to enhance opportunities for companies and schemes to work together, not only to enhance good practice, but also to speak with a stronger voice to funders and policy makers. Suggestions included regional meetings, perhaps around specific topics, the opportunity to attend each other's conferences (NRTF and PoP both have events up coming) and making better use of each other's websites.

I'd like to record my thanks to everyone who contributed to the conference, including Chris Fogg, Nicola Riley, Nicky Stainton, Richard Conlon, Caroline Barnes and Fiona Clayton who acted as session facilitators and to Sean Aita, Ivan Cutting and Ann Courtney who shared their personal experiences at key points in the conference. Gavin Stride, chair of PoP and Ralph Lister development director at NRTF first had the idea for this event and brought it to life. Jane Sperinck with support from New Perspectives staff did all the behind the scenes work which meant that the day itself ran so smoothly.

Larry Reynolds
Facilitator
Oct 03



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session two

Why Rural Arts?

- Shared experiences across all socio-economic groups and ages
- Intimacy of experience – ‘artists and audience using the same door’, ‘the company is the guest’
- Social experience, having fun
- Transformation of familiar local space
- Challenge of adapting to a non-theatre space
- Access – overcoming transport issues, gaining independence for young people, older people, people with disabilities and new audiences
- Engaging people in the arts
- Building new audiences for theatre and the arts
- Programming – monocultures accessing a culturally diverse range of work
- Village communities are not homogenous
- Democratic system engages with communities and artists
- Individual/personal/ career development for promoters, artists and audience.
- Skills development in marketing, managing, budgeting, fundraising etc
- Strengthening communities, supports regeneration
- Immediate feedback to artists
- Mutual respect – audience and promoters seeing artists at work
- Mutual trust – artist/promoter/audience
- Tensions – different parties with different agenda and pressures
- Personality a key point for all parties – village dependence on local personality is precarious – schemes and companies need to work together to limit this precariousness
- Awakening live, original magic!
- The big questions of life are universal
- More playful, more sense of transformation, more possibilities...
- Changing lives and motivating – new ways of thinking
- Emotional well being, quality of life, entitlement makes a difference
- A legacy of memory – unifying experiences for family and tribal gatherings
- All scales are trying to do the same thing – tell a story
- Pushing the boundaries, taking risks



session three

What are the Hallmarks of a Great Producing Company?

- Imagination – create new worlds and take the audience with them
- Thought provoking and challenging – ability to stretch an audience/take a journey
- Appropriate work
- Craft – communication – skill
- Flexibility to different situations and venues
- Knowing audience’s needs – artist led/audience focused dilemma – A great company will interpret the needs of the audience without artistic compromise
- Good admin and marketing – A great company will excite, will make the promoter want to go the extra yard
- Efficient communication with touring schemes – understanding the scheme’s needs
- Actors need good communication skills too
- Friendly ambassadors for the work and the scheme
- Acknowledgement of ‘guests’
- Trust and reliability – arrive on time, product sold is the product shown!
- Ingenious use of the space
- Companies must be clear about their own aims in terms of small and mid scale and the impact this might have on venues – commitment, passion, vision, ethos, values
- Need to access and act on evaluation and feedback – no room for prima donnas
- Leave hall as it was after the show
- Is the ITC hallmark appropriate?
- Ticket prices issue – does it undermine the professionalism?
- Clear publicity with space to overprint



session three continued

What are the Hallmarks of a Great Touring Scheme?

- Thinks not only of its audience and promoters but also of the artists
- Takes a balanced position about the needs of artist and village
- Keeps everyone involved in the development process
- Has a dedicated co-ordinator
- A vision and a passion
- Communicates and co-ordinates – honest, timely, two way communication
- Broker not gatekeeper
- Works creatively with the company through the process to delivery – even commissioning
- Promotes risk taking and development with both parties
- Sustains relationship with established companies and develops new companies
- Develops promoter confidence to move them into independent relationships with the companies
- Recognises that promoters are at different levels of development and supports individual promoters development with training, mentoring, accurate info, etc
- Knowledgeable about legal and other requirements of the sector
- Showcases the menu, opportunities to input into menu development
- Face to face communication
- Flexible, understands the creative process
- Desire for continuous improvement
- Communicates frequently to companies throughout
- Hands on approach
- Commitment to new work and new audiences
- Minimises risk
- Knows when to be an effective intermediary and when to step back



What are the Hallmarks of a Great Relationship Between Companies and Touring Schemes?

- Flexibility
- Communication – regular contact, accurate information, sharing updates, sharing feedback/research
- Cross sector working, conferences – lobbying, advocating each other, networking
- Building trust – continuity, honesty, support
- Understanding each others needs
- Professionalism on both sides
- Common ground – both wanting to promote the art form, sharing ethos
- Putting the audience first
- Joint commissioning
- A shared vision
- Communication between whole team



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session four

Quality

- 'There needs to be room in the carburettor for the spark'
- Duty to the audience – surprise and risk
- International collaborations
- Quality is a tired word – re-invention – quality without vision won't work
- Quality within the writer, director, designer – the only constant is change

- Quality of execution – communication, publicity, technical details, timetabling etc
- Quality of experience – to do with expectations, which change according to what you've seen at that place
- Some things are outside our control (the baby sitter was late) but even then the magic can overcome difficulties – depends on what the audience know beforehand – preparation
- Make the environment as appealing as possible
- Quality of outcome – might make people think what else they could do, see life differently, change opinions, prejudices
- Community building, building social capital, skills hard to assess except for anecdotal evidence – we're waiting for Francois' report!
- Artistic quality – the tingle down the spine – originality – need to fight against complacency, important to push boundaries
- Vitality/freshness better than originality – the magic can be made up of the other elements in varying combinations – the acting and the writing are crucial

- Difficult to evaluate and capture quality – need to take the long view – what are the outcomes?
- Promoters view – do people want to come to the next show and bring people with them? – word of mouth – has got to be entertaining
- The quality of the experience depends of communication between the company, scheme and promoter – everybody takes responsibility – put the audience first
- Inventiveness of the set.
- Quality is costly – ticket prices indicate quality!
- ITC good practice notes for new companies in village halls
- Do blow our own trumpets.

- Quality in conjunction with fitness for purpose
- Right product, right audience, right actor, an efficient process



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- Village halls need more funding for quality customer care
- Quality can be an expense – admin, rehearsal, marketing
- Quality of communication – clarity, honesty – need quality criteria
- Need a space for risk taking
- Quality is visual, emotional, relevance to audience, generates a reaction.

session four continued

- Artistic directors should make solving the technical and sight line challenges an organic part of the creative experience
- Designers should have placements with rural touring schemes and companies
- desire to see companies experiment with style and form with sceptical promoters and scheme managers
- retaining experienced stage managers
- companies need to know where they want their work to be seen
- taking care of actors
- schemes need to be funded appropriately to compete with middle scale venues

Feedback from the day

What did you enjoy about the conference?

“Meeting so many people all with a common aim and identical passions to myself”

“Positive Atmosphere – chance to talk rather than just listen”

“The excellent facilitation and organisation of the day which allowed people to meet, discuss, agree, disagree and compromise on topics important and relevant”

What would have made it better?



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“Maybe a chance to get more specific”

“More people representing village halls/promoters”

“Dessert! – the presence of more arts council reps”

Any other comments?

“I think it would be great to join forces and speak for rural communities and small scale art organisations... Communication, communication, communication”

“Very worthwhile, best day have spent in ages, years even”

“Very well facilitated – enjoyable and stimulating. Questions and agenda were not patronising but engaging”